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ABSTRACT

Suburban migration has been seen as a means of improving one's standard of living; the high quality of education in suburbia was believed to be one way of achieving this improvement. However, it appears that the suburbanites' belief in the American dream and their support of the educational system have cooled. Dissatisfaction among middle class suburban residents with the educational system is rampant. Declining enrollments, a changing student population, the influx of different values and cultures, and the lack of stability is causing turmoil in the suburban schools. The 1980s will see an increase in individuality which will force educators to find alternative approaches that will provide for individual learning needs. There will be a renewed emphasis on a partnership between parents and educators as well as a greater emphasis for accountability. Multi-media education will be common place. Middle class America's previous faith in education will not only return, but will improve. (Author/RLV)

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EDUCATION IN THE SUBURBS
-So Goes The Nation-

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Americans continue to seek ways to improve their standard of living and the importance of education is recognized as one way to achieve it. From rural and urban America, millions of people move to the suburbs as another positive step toward achieving success. The image of suburbia personifies the ultimate in the upward mobility concept people are seeking -- the quest for "the American Dream." The "good" schools are to be found in the suburbs. During the past decade, however, there has been a growing disillusionment with education's unfulfilled promises. Public education is in a state of crisis. The factors that brought about the post-World War II boom in suburban growth, also have brought about the very problems education is now experiencing. Rapid, traumatic changes in society have left suburbanites with a strong feeling of frustration. Expected stability did not occur. A new cynical attitude is permeating middle-class America. To bring some sense of order to our future and to revitalize the American spirit, there is a need to restore America's faith in its educational system as a first step. A new attitude, a renewed faith, is needed -- and it is possible to attain.

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The Changing Nature of the Suburbs

For the past several decades, families moving to the suburbs did so as a positive effort to improve the quality of life most

Americans sought. Suburbanites have had considerable faith in the educational system and gave unquestioning support to their schools. Education, in their minds, was one of the major keys to the "good life" and it provided the upward mobility they thought they needed to achieve success. Within the past few years disillusionment appears to have set in. Maybe the expectations of the suburban community were set too high. Maybe the growth problems of the suburban school systems prevented educators from ensuring that the outcomes of the educational program would meet the expectations. Whatever the cause, it appears that the suburbanites' love affair, and their support of the educational system, has cooled. There has been a growing concern over the increased costs of education with little or no concurrent increase in the educational attainment of the youth.

In the aftermath of World War II and the Korean police action, the economic growth of the United States encouraged millions of Americans to seek a better life. Increasing population mandated that families move into new housing created by the gigantic housing developments which were fanning out from the urban areas into what was to be called the suburbs. The suburbs of the 1950's and the 1960's are now beginning to resemble the urban areas of an earlier era. The new housing has aged. Young families, once concerned with the type and quality of education offered to their offspring, have aged. The youth have grown up and moved on. Parents, facing the exorbitant cost of new housing today, cannot afford to move. They are unable to buy the type of house that is

designed to meet their changing needs, and so they remain "rooted" and watch the value of their homes grow and along with it the tremendous increase in taxes. Personal income has not kept pace with inflation. Education, once the key factor for choosing to live in the suburbs, no longer is valued to the degree it once was. Suburbanites tend to resent increasing taxes for a commodity that appears to them to be a "poor buy." The emphasis on consumerism has reached parents who want to be sure that their taxes are bringing an appropriate return on their investment. The middle-class American society, the bastion of suburbia, has witnessed an apparent decline in the quality of education and the product it produces. In effect, the group identified here believes that the education they experienced when they were in school, is not comparable today. There are too many "frills" and not enough basics. The validity of these perceptions can be argued but the point remains: middle-class Americans perceive a deterioration in student achievement due to inadequate education. One example of this growing concern is the current debate over the decline in the SAT scores. Educational costs continue to increase while the scores continue to decline. Another example can be seen in the results of many polls that state that discipline is lacking in the schools and needs to be restored.

The values held by middle-class Americans are being challenged by a younger generation. Our children, growing up in a space-age environment, in which change is extremely rapid, and usually accepted, and in which they are more sensitive to the unknown future than their parents, are the leaders in the assault on our traditional

values. Suburbia no longer is a closely-knit environment in which all of the residents share the same basic values. The new family on the block most likely will bring not only different values but may introduce a different culture. No value judgment is being suggested, only that suburbia is becoming a growing mixture of many kinds of people and each wants something different for the youth.

Much has been said about the plight of the urban area and of the "white flight" to the suburbs, but little has been said about the impact of changing demographics on the suburbs and the schools they spawned. Declining enrollments, a changing student population, different values and cultures, and the lack of some stability is causing turmoil in the schools of the suburbs. We are in a period of traumatic transition.

Trends of the Eighties

The unpredictability of the future may be viewed as one of society's assets. If tomorrow were known today, we could not enjoy the present since we would be dreading the pessimistic events to come or anticipating the optimistic activities about to occur. While we cannot predict what will happen, we are able to suggest a variety of alternative futures based upon dependable forecasting by futurists in our society.

A recent report by the U. S. News & World Report suggests "a 1980's profile of a more conservative but more prosperous

America dominated -- economically, anyway -- by pressure for better jobs and pay, and by markets built more around the needs and pleasures of working adults and the elederly and less around children." This changing economy will have an impact on suburbia. Population shifts, as noted earlier, will continue with declining school enrollments (at least at the secondary school level) as a significant symptom. More money per person will be available for spending but inflation will continue. With the children gone, parents, enticed by a growing market of material goods available to meet their personal needs, will continue to resent the call for more taxes to support the educational system. The "MEism" society of the 1970's will continue, and nowhere will this attitude be more prevalent than in the suburbs.

Suburbanites when faced with the prospect of not being able to relocate, will turn to modernizing their homes. There has always been a fascination by suburbanites with "gadgetry." The proliferation of these items will be overwhelming. The micro-miniaturization of electronic devices will offer a new revolution in our way of life, specifically the impending electronic home. Computers will dominate the life of middle-class America. The power line, like the umbilical cord, will sustain the future person encapsulated in an electronic world of home appliances.

Values will continue to change. True individuality will forge a comeback and by the end of the decade will come to fruition. Vestiges of "MEism," individuality in its most negative aspect, will continue to linger but a new concern for one's self as a

responsible person, and for others will emerge in the 1980's -- not necessarily in a social sense but from the need for inter-dependency of one human being with another. The apparent abdication of parent control over the child will change. Parents, with newly acquired parenting skills, will structure the life of their children in such a way as to give the child a greater degree of security, responsibility and sense of direction during the child's growing years. Individualism and responsibility, both personal and social, will characterize the milieu of the schools during the coming decade.

The emphasis on individuality will force educators to find alternative approaches that will provide for individualized learning. Greater experimentation will be seen in the schools of suburbia in an attempt to find the best balance of personalized learning with limited resources to meet society's expectations. Managing tomorrow's schools will require dedicated and highly skilled personnel with the ability to do what might be considered the impossible. Suburban dwellers, however, will expect nothing less in order to ensure true value and maximum return on their tax dollar.

Educational Expectations of the Eighties

The concept of "in loco parentis," that apparently has been rejected by recent major court decisions, will be replaced by a renewed emphasis on a partnership between parents and educators. Parents not only will be expected to, but will actively, participate

in all aspects of their schools. Citizen committees, working cooperatively with educators at the local school level, will design, implement, monitor, and evaluate the instructional program that will ensure that local needs of youth are met. Concurrently, with the advent of more federal dollars being pumped into the educational economy, a national curriculum will begin to emerge. The issue of who will have control of the schools will continue to exist. The federal government will develop a broad curriculum policy, with appropriate financial support, within which local citizen-educator groups will have some flexibility to tailor the curriculum of their schools to meet their specific situation. If Proposition 13 mentality continues, and it appears most likely that it will, the state may wrest additional control away from local districts in all but some innocuous areas. The potential for losing local control will increase unless middle-class America makes it known that it wants control of its own schools.

Increased parent participation will bring about a greater emphasis for accountability. The demand for a more highly educated worker by an increasingly technological society will require that the product of the educational system meet expected competency levels, or remain in the system until he or she does. Once minimum standards have been set and met, there will be a demand to increase the standards to a higher level. Nowhere will this expectation for quality be more pronounced than in suburbia. Unfortunately, youth who are incapable of performing at the expected level, will pose a problem for educators. The "new" high school competency-based

diploma will become a highly desirable status symbol and a passport to key career opportunities.

Accountability and a competency-based educational program will require, and will provide more opportunity for, an increasing emphasis on EACH student. Individualized instruction is not a new concept by any means, but the inability of educators to implement this important strategy is primarily due to the overwhelming numbers of students in each teacher's classroom. When one must educate thirty to forty active young people, whose difference in learning style frequently exceeds any similarities that may exist, it is difficult for the teacher to think and plan individualized learning activities. The potential of the eighties will permit a renewed movement toward personalized, or individualized, instruction. Suburban dwellers will approve of the school's use of electronic "gadgets" to accomplish what has been unattainable in the past.

The use of television, computers, tape-recorders, videotapes, holography, and other multi-media to reach each student individually, and all students collectively, in sequence or at the same time, not only will be found in most suburban schools, but will become common place by the end of the decade. The electronic school, plugged into the electronic home, will push suburbia into the twenty-first century long before the urban or rural schools achieve a readiness for such a move. The cost of this equipment, prohibited in today's economy, will be the most effective and efficient alternative to the continuing high costs of education. If the predicted teacher

shortage occurs by the mid-eighties, school administrators shall have to seek alternative ways to deliver a sound, quality educational program for a demanding suburban population.

A new partnership between parents and educators; a determination to ensure accountability through a competency-based education; an emphasis on personalized instruction using sophisticated electronic equipment; and a dedicated, highly skilled, yet caring, teaching staff supervising a cadre of trained paraprofessionals and technicians; will be the forerunner of a new attitude toward education followed by increasing financial support for schools by our society. The federal government will assume more responsibility for financing education but without the bureaucratic red tape that exists today. Middle-class America's previous faith in education not only will return but will improve as society recognizes and fully accepts the absolute need for an educated citizenry to provide the leadership needed to examine alternative futures and select the best approach to move America into the year 2000 and beyond.

This is not to say that hope for an optimistic educational tomorrow will come soon. The early 1980's will find education continuing to experience the problems of the seventies but there will be a gradual shift away from these problems into a new era whose impetus will reside in a new attitude that will grow out of a belief that in spite of how bad education is perceived today, it still offers the best approach for the improvement of the quality of life and for the provision of a realistic and desirable

future. In the forefront of this movement will be those people who lived and grew up in suburbia during the past two decades. As education goes in the suburbs, so goes the nation.

References

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